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Go,maya Sutta

The Cow-dung Discourse | S 22.96/3:143-147

Be: **Go,maya Piṇḍa Sutta** The Discourse on a Lump of Cow-dungCe: **Go,maya Piṇḍ'upama Sutta** The Discourse on the Parable of the Lump of Cow-dung

Theme: The impermanence of all luxuries

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Introduction

The Go,maya Sutta is quite a straightforward discourse dealing with the perception of impermanence. When a monk asks the Buddha whether there is any body or aspect of the mind that is permanent and stable, the Buddha replies that there is none. By way of an object lesson, the Buddha then takes a pellet of cow-dung in his hand and tells him that the personality in any one life-span (*atta, bhāva*) does not have any permanence or stability even as tiny as that cow-dung pellet.

The Buddha then relates to the monk story of king Mahā Sudassana of Kusāvati. Mahā Sudassana has great wealth, power and pleasures, but in the end they all perished, all the same. This short sutta is significant in affirming that the Mahā Sudassana Sutta (D 17) is a text that highlights the teaching on impermanence.¹

This sutta was said to have been rehearsed by the elder Mahinda at the Nandana grove, on the sixth day after his arrival in Sri Lanka (Mahv 15.197).

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The Cow-dung Discourse

S 22.96/3:143-147

1 Arising at Sāvathī.

2 Then a certain monk approached the Blessed One. Having saluted the Blessed One, he sat down at one side.²

3 Sitting thus at one side, the monk said this to the Blessed One:

Is there any mind or matter that is permanent?

4 “Bhante, is there any form that is permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain forever, just like eternity itself?³

5 Bhante, is there any feeling that is permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain forever, just like eternity itself?

6 Bhante, is there any perception that is permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain forever, just like eternity itself?

7 Bhante, are there any formations that are permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain forever, just like eternity itself?

8 Bhante, is there any consciousness that is [144] permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain forever, just like eternity itself?”

Neither mind nor matter is permanent

9 “No, indeed, bhikshu, there is *no form*

¹ D 17/2:169-199 & SD 36.12 (4.2.4).

² This line only in Ee Ce Se, but Be omits.

³ *Atthi nu kho, bhante, kiñci rūpaṃ yaṃ rūpaṃ niccaṃ dhuvāṃ sassataṃ avipariṇāma, dhammaṃ sassati, samaṃ tath'eva ṭhassati?* Here it should be understood that even “eternity” (*sassati*) is not a “thing,” but merely a concept.

that is permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain forever, just like eternity itself.

9 No, indeed, bhikshu, there is *no feeling*

that is permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain forever, just like eternity itself.

11 No, indeed, bhikshu, there is *no perception*

that is permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain forever, just like eternity itself.

12 No, indeed, bhikshu, there are *no formations*

that are permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain forever, just like eternity itself.

13 No, indeed, bhikshu, there is *no consciousness*

that is permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain forever, just like eternity itself.”

The parable of the lump of cow-dung

14 Then, the Blessed took a small lump of cow-dung in his hand, and said this to that monk:

15 “Bhikshu, there is not even this much personal existence [personality]⁴ that is permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain forever, just like eternity itself.⁵

16 If, bhikshu, there were even this much personal existence that is permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change,⁶

this living of the holy life for the utter destruction of suffering cannot be known.⁷

However, bhikshu, there is not even this much personal existence that is permanent, certain, eternal, not subject to change,

therefore, the living of the holy life for the utter destruction of suffering *can* be known.

The story of Mahā Sudassana⁸

17 Once upon a time, bhikshu, I was a head-anointed king.⁹

As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,

I had 84,000 cities,

the chief of which is the royal city of Kusā,vātī;

18 As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,

I had 84,000 palaces,

the chief of which is the Dharma palace;

19 As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,

I had 84,000 pinnacled halls,

the chief of which is the pinnacled hall of great dispelling;

20 As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,

I had 84,000 couches,

made of gold, and silver, and ivory, and hardwood, spread over with long-furred rugs, and coverlets embroidered with long-furred rugs, embroidered white

⁴ “Personal existence,” *atta,bhāva* (BHS *ātma,bhāva*), “personality,” ie the personality or existence as in individual in any life-span (V 2:238; M 2:32; A 3:411; J 4:461; Ap 215; Miln 171; Vism 310).

⁵ *Ettako’pi kho, bhikkhu, attabhāva,paṭilābho n’atthi nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāma,dhammo sassati,samam tath’eva ṭhassati.*

⁶ This and the next line: *Ettako ce’pi, bhikkhu, attabhāva,paṭilābho abhavissa nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāma,-dhammo, na-y-idam brahma,cariyavāso paññāyetha sammā dukkha-k,khayāya.*

⁷ Comy: For, the path arises for the “rolling back” [stilling] of the formations in the three worlds (*maggo hi tebhū-maka,saṅkhāre vivaṭṭento uppajjati*). If even this much personal existence were permanent, though the path might arise, it would not be able to roll back [still] the cycle of formations. Thus the holy life would not be known. (SA 2:324)

⁸ This is to show that “If any formations were permanent, then the success I enjoyed when I was king Mahā Sudassana would have been permanent.” (SA 2:324)

⁹ These are the 14 precious possessions of king Mahā Sudassana, but only 13 are listed here, with the omission of the 84,000 householders and the steward jewel. As a wheel-turner (*cakka,vatti*) or world monarch, he also possesses the “seven jewels” (*satta ratana*), viz, the divine wheel, the elephant, the horse, the gem, the woman, the steward, and the commander. Of these only the first is not listed here as it is unique. For further details, see **Mahā Sudassana** S (D 17.2.5/2:187) & SD 36.12.

- woollen sheets, choice rugs of Kadalī deer hide, spreads with red canopies, and crimson double rests [crimson pillows and bolsters] for the head and feet;¹⁰ [145]
- 21 As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,
I had 84,000 elephants,
with gold trappings, and gilded flags, and covered with a golden netting¹¹—the chief of which is the king of elephants, named Uposatha [Sabbath];
- 22 As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,
I had 84,000 horses,
with gold trappings, and gilded flags, and covered with a golden netting—the chief of which is the king of horses, named Valāhaka [Thunder-cloud];
- 23 As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,
I had 84,000 chariots,
with coverings of lion hide, of tiger hide, of leopard hide, with saffron-coloured blankets, with gold trappings, with golden banners, each covered with a golden net—the chief of which is the chariot Veja,yanta [the victory machine];¹²
- 24 As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,
I had 84,000 jewels,
the chief of which is the gem jewel;
- 25 As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,
I had 84,000 women,
the chief of whom is queen Subhaddā;¹³
- 26 As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,
I had 84,000 loyal¹⁴ nobles,
the chief of whom is commander jewel;
- 27 As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,
I had 84,000 milch cows
with jute tethers and bronze milking pails;¹⁵
- 28 As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,
I had 84,000 myriads of garments
of fine linen, fine cotton, fine silk, and fine wool;
- 29 As a head-anointed king, bhikshu,
I had 84,000 dishes
for the serving of rice.¹⁶

¹⁰ This passage is part of a stock in **Mahā Siha,nāda S** parable (M 12.41/1:76) = SD 2.24 & **Velāma S** (A 9.20.-4/4:393 f) = SD 16.6. The phrase *ubhato,lohita-kūpadhāno*, alt tr “crimson rests at both ends (of the couch).” Cf **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1.15/1:7) & **Venāga S** (A 3.63.3b/1:181) = SD 21.1, for a more detailed list.

¹¹ *Hema,jāla,paṭicchanna*; also covered with little bells (*kiṅkiṇi*) (**Suvaṇṇa Vv**, Vv 7.4/113); maidens’ hair covering (**Bhūri,datta J**, J 543/6:188).

¹² This passage is part of a stock in **Mahā Siha,nāda S** parable (M 12.41/1:76) = SD 2.24 & **Velāma S** (A 9.20.-4/4:393) = SD 16.6. See **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1.15/1:7) & **Venāga S** (A 3.63.3b/1:181) = SD 21.1, for a more detailed list. **Vejayanta** is prob resolved as *vijaya* (“victory”) + *yanta* (“machinery, instrument, device”), by way of a haplology (loss of syllable *ya*): as Mahā Sudassana’s chariot, see DA 2:482. It is also the name of Shakra’s chariot, which is 150 leagues long, drawn by 1000 horses, with Mātali as charioteer; used both in battle against the asuras (eg S 1:224 f) and to bring humans to the deva world (cf M 2:79 f; S 1:211, 234-236): see **Sudhā,bhojana J** (J 535/5:408 f); see also MA 1:225; SA 2:325; J 1:202, 6:103; VvA 141. It is better known as the name of Shakra’s palace, eg in **Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 37.8-9/1:253 f); see also DA 2:481, 558, 716; SA 2:303; DhA 1:273; J 1:203; ThaA 3:173; ApA 244; cf M 1:338.

¹³ Foll this, **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 1.7) has “As a head-anointed king, bhikshu, I had 84,000 houselords, the chief of whom is the steward jewel” (*catur’āsīti gaha,patī sahasāni ahesuṃ gahapati, ratana-p, pamukhāni*), which is omitted here.

¹⁴ *Anuyanta* (adj pl), from *anu-yāti*, “he follows along.”

¹⁵ *Catur-āsīti dhenū, sahasāni ahesuṃ duha, sandanāni kamsūpadhāraṇāni*.

¹⁶ *Catur-āsīti thālīpāka, sahasāni ahesuṃ sāyaṃ pātāṃ bhattābhīhāro abhihariyittha. Thālī, pāka = thali* (“earthen pot, large dish”) + *pāka* (“cooked”): here prob simply means “dish” (food-serving) or perhaps “pots of food” (V 3:15; D 1:97 :: DA 1:267; S 2:242, 5:384; A 1:166; J 1:186; Miln 249).

Mahā Sudassana's frugal life¹⁷

- 30 But, bhikkhu, of those 84,000 cities, at that time, I lived in only one of them, namely, the royal city of Kusā,vātī.¹⁸
- 31 But, bhikkhu, of those 84,000 palaces, at that time, I lived in only one of them, namely, the Dharma palace.
- 32 But, bhikkhu, of those 84,000 pinna-cled halls, [146] at that time, I lived in only one of them, namely, the pinnacled halls of great dispelling.
- 33 But, bhikkhu, of those 84,000 couches, at that time, I used only one, namely, one made of gold, or of silver, or of ivory, or of hardwood.¹⁹
- 34 But, bhikkhu, of those 84,000 elephants, at that time, I rode only one of them, namely, the king of elephants, named Uposatha [Sabbath].
- 35 But, bhikkhu, of those 84,000 horses, at that time, I rode only one, namely, the king of horses, named Valāhaka [Thunder-cloud].
- 36 But, bhikkhu, of those 84,000 chariots, at that time, I rode only one, namely, the chariot Veja-yanta [the victory machine].²⁰
- 37 But, bhikkhu, of those 84,000 women, at that time, only one is present,²¹ namely, a kshatriya woman or a velāmikā woman.²²
- 38 But, bhikkhu, of those 84,000 myriads of garments, at that time, I wore only one suit, either of fine linen, or fine cotton, of fine silk, or of fine wool.
- 39 But, bhikkhu, of those 84,000 dishes, at that time, I ate only one measure of rice at most with a suitable amount of curry.²³
- 40 Thus, bhikkhu, all these formations have passed away, ceased, changed.²⁴

¹⁷ The opulence listed here is fully recounted in **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17) as being impermanent (D 17.2.15/2:-197 f) = SD 36.12, but has a different line for §40: see n ad loc. Comy: Having shown his success at the time when he was king Mahā Sudassana, he now shows its impermanence. Just as a man might use a ladder to climb up a champak tree to the height a hundred hands [a “hand,” *hattha* = length from elbow to finger-tip], pluck a champak flower, and then come down, even so the Blessed One has raised the story of king Mahā Sudassana's success of countless ages and millennia, taken the characteristic of impermanence at the top, and descended. (SA 3:326)

¹⁸ Comy says that “his sons and daughters, and (their) slaves and people” (*avasesesu putta,dhūtādayo ceva dāsa,-manussā ca vasiṃsu*, SA 2:325).

¹⁹ Note that this is a much shorter list than the previous [§2.14.2], ie minus the frills, as also in the next 3 items. Comy says that the other couches are used by his family members, “sons and so on” (*putt'ādīnam*, SA 2:325).

²⁰ Note that the “gem jewel” (*maṇi, ratana*), which follows in the previous stock listing, is omitted here.

²¹ “Waited upon,” *paccupaṭṭhāti*.

²² The whole line: *Tesaṃ kho pana, bhikkhu, catur'āsītiyā itthi, saḥassānaṃ ekāy'eva sā itthī hoti yā maṃ tena samayena paccupaṭṭhāti, khattiyānī vā velāmikā vā. Mahā Sudassana S* (D 17) has: *Ekāy'eva sā itthī hoti, yā tena samayena paccupaṭṭhāti khattiyānī vā velāmikānī vā* (most MSS) (D 17.2.15/2:198). DPPN (Velāmikā) takes Khat-tiyānī and Velāmikā as alt names of the same woman. Buddhaghosa explains that a *velāmika* is a kshatriya of mixed marriage, ie, one born of a kshatriya father and a brahmin mother, or of a brahmin father and a kshatriya father (*khat-tiyassa vā brāhmaṇiyā, brāhmaṇassa vā khattiyāniyā kucchismiṃ jātā*, SA 2:325). Bodhi has “a khattiya maiden or a *velāmika* maiden” (S:B 955). The next 3 items, on the householders, the nobles and the milch cows (D 17.2.14.2), are omitted here (as in D 17).

²³ *Yato nālik'odana, paramaṃ bhuñjāmi tad upiyaṃ ca sūpeyyaṃ*. The cpd *nālik'odana* = *nālika* (a *nāli* measure of boiled rice) + *odana* (“boiled rice”) (S 1:82; DhA 3:265, 4:17). Bodhi, foll Burlingame (“a pint-pot of rice,” DhA: B 3:77), tr *nālik'odana* as “a pint-pot measure of rice” (S:B 177 & 405 n231; cf DhA:B 3:76 f). On the meaning of *thāli, pāka*, see §2.5 n.

²⁴ *Iti kho, bhikkhu, sabbe te saṅkhārā atītā niruddhā vipariṇatā. Mahā Sudassana S* (D 17) had the foll line instead: “See, bhikkhu, how these formations [conditioned things] are all gone, ceased, changed” (*pass'ānanda, sabb'ete saṅkhārā atītā niruddhā vipariṇatā*) (D 17.2.16/2:198) = SD 36.12.

41 Indeed, bhikkhu, so impermanent are formations! Indeed, bhikkhu, so unlasting are formations! Indeed, bhikkhu, so unreliable are formations! **[147]**

42 It is enough, bhikkhu, to feel revulsion towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to be liberated from them.²⁵

— evaṃ —

110718, 110724; 110818a; 111005; 120306

²⁵ *Yāvañ c'idaṃ, ānanda, alam eva sabba,saṅkhāresu nibbinituṃ, alam virajjituṃ, alam vimuccituṃ: Mahā Suddassana S (D 17.2.16/2:198); Anamatagga Saṃy (S 15.1-20/2:178-193), Go,maya S (S 22.96/3:147), Nakha,sikhā S (S 22.97/3:149); Satta Suriya S (A 7.62/4:100+103); Nc:Be 136.*